

CHILD BRIDES IN XIX CENTURY ITALY: THE CASE OF MONTALLEGRO (AG)

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1. Introduction

The expression ‘child brides’ is a relatively recent term which normally refers to a child or a teenage girl joined in a marriage with a groom often (but not always) much older. Currently, this kind of unions (involving a minor under the age of 18) is widespread in many countries. The highest levels of child marriage are recorded in West and Central Africa, where nearly the 40% of young women were married before age 18. The practice is present with lower levels in Eastern and Southern Africa (32%), South Asia (28 %), and Latin America and Caribbean (21%)¹. However, marriage unions involving minors represented a practice that always existed in all over the world and over time and perhaps was still present in some Western European countries at least until up to the 1960s. The dignity and protection regarding childhood and adolescence nowadays, at least in European and North American context, has resulted from a recent awareness and inevitably influence our judgment towards a practice that is now considered ‘uncivilized’. There is an extensive literature devoted to the history of marriage and family (Goody, 1983; Duby, 1991), their evolution over time and the structures assumed: neolocality or patrilocality, monogamous or polygamous marriage (Herlihy, 1985) and the patterns established in different geographical contexts (Hajnal, 1965; De Moor and Van Zanden, 2010). There has been no shortage of studies focusing on the Italian context in the same period considered in the present work (Barbagli, 1987; Rettaroli, 1990; Derosas et al., 2014; Caltabiano, 2020). However, up to now, very little evidence exists regarding young brides in the past both within Italian and European perspective, their social origins, and the norms regulating such practices. In the attempt to reconstruct the history of child marriages scattered throughout the broader literature on marriage and family mentioned above, it was possible to identify some common factors promoting very low age at marriage. First of all, a young bride is a guarantee of higher fertility, chastity and certainty of offspring. Secondly, a young and inexperienced mind is more easily conditioned,

¹ UNICEF global databases, 2022 <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>.

consequently a young girl would bend without difficulty to the will of the parents and the groom. Another, but no less impactful factor was, and in many countries still is, the dowry or the bride price: younger is the bride, lower will be the dowry her parents have to offer or higher will be the bride-price they will receive in exchange (Botticini and Siow, 2003; Anderson, 2007). While other determinants potentially related to this practise were (and are) life expectancy, institutional factors, economic system, religion, 'collective crisis' like war, famine, disease, and environmental disasters (Bell, 1979; Ahmed et al., 2019; Corno et al., 2020). In some European countries, including Italy this phenomenon, strictly linked to the practice of forced marriages, is re-emerging as effect of immigration from Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh and communities belonging to the Roma ethnic group. A better understanding of the dynamics behind these marriage practices, is indispensable to deal with them. This paper aims at investigating early marriage patterns in nineteenth-century Italy within circumscribed territorial contexts. The "child brides" here considered are young teenagers between the ages of 12 and 15. The paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, the second section briefly outlines the socio economic picture of the Sicily at the time; the third section provides an overview of child marriages diffusion at the national and regional level, the fourth section focuses on source description and the fifth one is dedicated to child-bride marriages in Montallegro, finally a short conclusion proceeds.

2. Sicilian socio economic -context in XIX century (1815-1876)

After the Napoleonic interlude, King Ferdinand I of Bourbon regained possession of the Kingdom of Naples, while in Sicily it was set up a Commission for the Rectification of the Constitution of 1812, whose importance lies in its attempt to create a parliament on the English model and the abolition, at least at least in law, of feudalism. However, after 1815, as well as before the constitution, the Sicilian population could basically be grouped into two classes: a narrow class of very wealthy landlords, the other, including almost all the rest of the population, made up of illiterate and null peasants who were often day laborers. Those who did not fall into either class were only a few small-town merchants, craftsmen and a few small-to-medium landlords. (Franchetti and Sonnino, 1877). This social composition is perfectly reflected in the village here considered, Montallegro. Acute social inequalities were joined by not a few problems of security and crime specially in some provinces (Bonfadini, 1876) In fact, as observed by Franchetti and Sonnino in their report on the condition of Sicily after Italian reunion, despite some common features, the island showed many social differences from a geographic area to another. The area more disadvantaged used to be the central

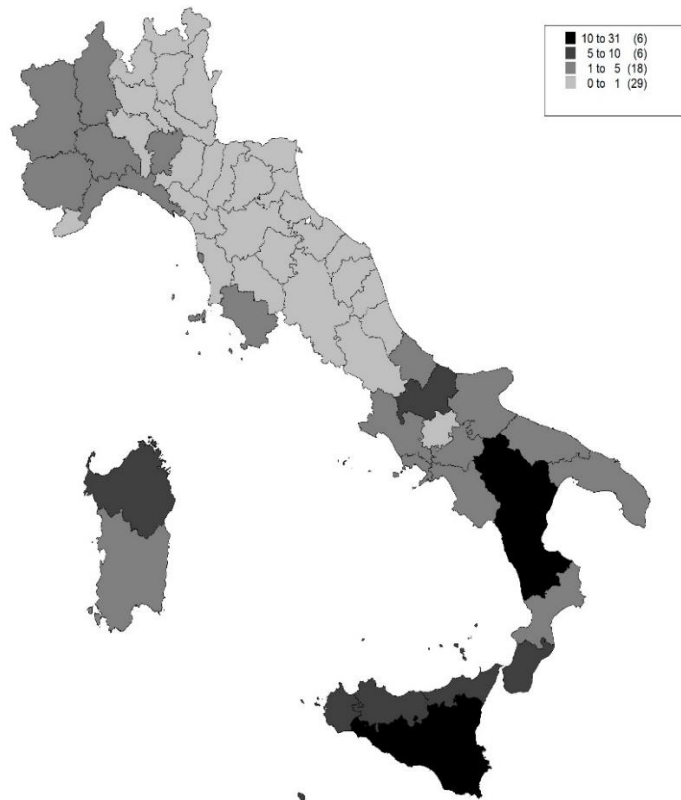
section of Sicily from the Tyrrhenian to the southern coast (with the exclusion of the eastern and western areas), characterized by latifundia, desolation and more difficult internal connections. Following this classification, the little municipality of Montallegro belongs to this area. Here the economy was based on graniculture alternating with natural grazing and fallow land. Peasants' conditions were particularly hard, having to travel many kilometres to reach the work camp they often slept rough and away from their families who remained near urban centres. Consequently, women remained didn't participate in the agricultural works except during the periods of harvesting crops, grape harvest and olive or hazelnut harvest. Women from poorer families usually joined these activities, outside of that, women always stay at home, spinning flax, tending pigs and babies. In contrast, in the oriental area of the island women used to be more involved in agriculture including work away from home. (Franchetti and Sonnino, 1877). Another key element of the economy of inland Sicily was sulfur mining as witnessed by the numerous mines in the provinces of Agrigento, Caltanissetta and parts of Palermo and Catania. In these mines, men, boys and solely even girls used to be in a dreadful state especially because of the poor hygienic conditions which favoured the spread of diseases, often lethal (Talamo, 1903) while the absence of strict rules from the government in the exploitation of sulfur might have favoured, according to some scholars, the rise of mafia power after the collapse of the Bourbon Kingdom (Buonanno et al., 2015).

3. Child Marriage in Italy (1861-1871)

This study employs the 1861 and 1871 Italian general population censuses to observe the dimension of child brides' marriage at different levels (national, regional, and provincial). The decree establishing the Statistical Service of the newly unified Kingdom of Italy was issued in October 1861 by Filippo Cordova, former director of the office of General Statistics of the Kingdom of Sardinia (Favero, 2012). The census of 1871 realized 10 years after the first one, as the latter, considered legal population the present inhabitants at that moment in all the 69 provinces into which the kingdom was divided, 10 more than the previous census which did not include Veneto and Lazio yet. However, even though it regards a still incomplete Kingdom, the 1861 census represents a sort of "bridge" and takes a picture of Italy during a delicate socio-political transition in which institutional elements of the previous restoration States still regulated important aspects of civic life. Counting for each province the number of girls aged 12-15 already married at the time of the first census (Figure 1), emerges a clear concentration of the "phenomenon" in the southern regions of the country,

Northern Calabria, Basilicata and especially in the southern part of Sicily corresponding to the current provinces of Catania, Siracusa, Enna, Caltanissetta and Agrigento. Northwest regions, Sardinia and Apulia are affected to a lesser extent, while the lowest numbers are recorded in central, and the northern Italy. The second census shows a sharp decline in the south and an almost unchanged picture in the central and northern regions and in Sardinia. The numbers in Sicily remain high, but they affect a more circumscribed area related to Caltanissetta and Agrigento provinces. This latter records the highest percentage, for this reason this study is centred on a municipality belonging to this province.

Figure 1 – Number of 12-15-years-old brides per 10.000 inhabitants.



Source: Italian Census 1861

4. The Sources: *I Registri dello Stato Civile della popolazione (1819-1865)*

The main source here employed is represented by the *Registri dello Stato civile* of the restoration period adopted by Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1819 in place of the Napoleonic Code (Sciarra, 2016) and remained valid until 1865 (during the first four years of the new State) after which they were replaced by the new Civil Code Pisanelli (1866). In the *Codice per lo Regno delle Due Sicilie*, inspired by the French model, the life events were divided in three different registers: births, deaths and marriages. Chapter Three of Title II of the Code contains instructions for the correct compilation of marriage acts. These deeds have to include the following information: names of both brides and grooms, their age and profession (for grooms), birthplace and domicile of both; whether they have reached the age of majority; whether they have already been married; names, professions and domicile of their respective parents and wedding witness; parental consent or failing that of their paternal ancestor or family council; the solemn promise of the bride and groom to celebrate the marriage in the face of the Church, in accordance with the forms prescribed by the Council of Trent (*Codice del Regno delle Due Sicilie del 1819*). In addition, depending on the presence or absence of the signatures at the bottom of the act, it is possible to infer if the spouses, and their parents, were literate or not. Ceremony was preceded by the civil engagement of get married within one year in front of the Mayor or a civil registrar of the municipality to which they belong. A copy of the act of marriage was delivered to the priest who had to celebrate it and then again to the civil registrar. Without civil promise, the marriage was only valid for the church (Caltabiano, 2020). In other words, the civil efficacy of the marriage required the religious rite and so it was until the adoption of the new Pisanelli Code which succeeded in secularizing the institution of marriage (Sciarra, 2016). The Chapter I of Title V (*Del Matrimonio*) is dedicated to the necessary conditions and requisites for marriage. The minimum age for contracting marriage was 12 for women and 14 for men with parents' consent (the age of supposed acquired consent capacity for both sexes). There was another aspect that may have influenced age at marriage: the necessity of parental consent. Despite the age of majority was reached at 21 years for both women and men, only after 25 for men and 21 for women, parental and family approval was no more essential. The Code Pisanelli raised the marriage age to 15 for the bride and 18 for the groom and lowered the need for parental consent to 21 (*Titolo V, Capo I, Sezione I, del Matrimonio*) and from what emerges from the figures of the second census, it would seem to have played a role in reducing early marriages from the outset. To sum up, the registers of marriages of the Restoration Period provide a wealth of information useful for micro demographic studies based on individual data. All the registers regarding Montallegro are available in digital format on

www.antenati.san.beniculturali.it (Project *Antenati* supported by the *Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo*), together with the other municipalities of the province of Agrigento (and of almost the rest of the country). In this paper, historical series of all marriages celebrated in Montallegro from 1821 to 1865 are presented (registers of 1822, 1825 and 1844 are lost) focusing on brides' age at marriage along with their age difference with their spouses' age.

5. Nuptiality and Child Brides in Montallegro (1821-1865)

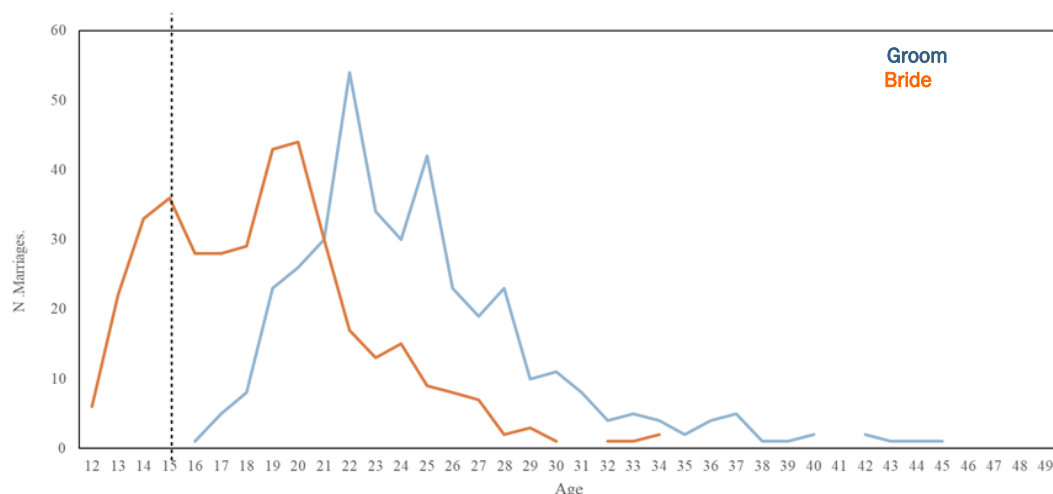
Montallegro is a little municipality located in the southwestern area of the province of Agrigento. It develops mainly inland and has a short outlet to the sea. According to the first census of the newly formed kingdom of Italy, Montallegro used to have in 1861 a population of 1.626 inhabitants, 807 men, 819 women and a fairly high nuptiality rate in the same year 11,1 per 1000 compared with the national marriage rate in Italy the following year, 8.9 per 1000. Data referred to high nuptiality rate is consistent with what has been observed in more recent studies focusing on marriages in XIX century Italy confirming the association between latifundia, low ultimate celibacy and neolocal family in Sicily (Rettaroli, 1990; Cocchi et al., 1996).

Table 1 – Mean values and Standard deviation concerning age at first and successive marriages in Montallegro (1821-1865).

Mean Age	Bride	Standard Dev.	Groom	Standard Dev.
At first marriage	19,5	±5,3	25,2	±5,6
In remarriage	36,8	±11,3	41,7	±11,2
All	24	±10,5	29,7	±10,6

Source: *Registri di Stato civile della Popolazione di Montallegro*.

As you can see in table 1, the average age difference between bride and groom both at the first marriage and in remarriage and of the overall unions is always about five years within the classic hypergamous marriage typical of most couples (Giuliani, 2019).

Figure 2 – Age at first marriage in Montallegro 1821-1865.

Source: *Registri di Stato civile della Popolazione di Montallegro.*

As it is possible to observe in Figure 2, in most part, the marriageable age for women ranges from 12 (presumably once they reach puberty) until 23-24, while the number of brides between the ages of 22 and 30 gradually decreases. From this age onward, with some exceptions, they were evidently considered out of the 'marriage market'. For men, entry and exit in the marriage market seems to be shifted about 4-5 years substantially mirroring the difference observed in Table 1. For grooms, frequency peaks are shown at 22, one year after having reached the age of majority and 25, age at which parental consent to marriage was no longer required (*Codice per lo Regno delle Due Sicilie, Titolo IX and Titolo XI*). The same consideration cannot be made for women, probably because they still had less decision-making power despite their legal status. However, for both men and women, in this little municipality belonging to a latifundia area with high need for wage labor, age at first marriage was lower than in other predominantly sharecropping Italian regions in XIX century where families were engaged in direct farm management (Cocchi et al., 1996). The occupations of the spouses and/or their parents transcribed in the records of marriage reflect the socio-economic structure described in section 2 regarding this inland and southern part of Sicily in which most part of the population was employed in agriculture, to a lesser extent in animal farming and in the mines present at the time in the neighbouring territories. Given the small number of ranchers and miners, in Table 2 and in Table 3, these three 'sectors' are grouped together to represent the humblest socioeconomic class.

There was also a fair amount of traders and artisans and a wealthy class, identified in the registers with the terms ‘borghese’, ‘civile’ and ‘gentiluomo’ as well as ‘possidente’. In Table 2 marriages including child brides are grouped by social class by taking into consideration the groom's profession. It would have been more correct to establish the bride's social group by referring to her father's occupation, but unfortunately this information is not always reported in the records, especially in the cases in which the father is dead. However, where present, the father's profession is almost always the same of the son-in-law. In other words, we are dealing with homogamous marriages, namely unions between members of the same social group, as observed in other Sicilian contexts of the same period (Caltabiano, 2020).

Table 2 – *Groom's professional field and child brides (Montallegro 1821-1865)*

Groom's professional field	Number of marriages	Brides-aged 12-15	% brides 12-15
Agriculture, Farm and Mine	466	67	14,3
Craft and Trade	81	17	20,0
Upper Class	162	41	25,0
Other (unreadable)	8	0	0,0
Total	717	125	17,4

Source. *Registri di Stato civile della Popolazione di Montallegro.*

As we can observe in Table 2 the highest percentage of child brides is not found among the marriages of the supposed poorest social stratum, but among the ‘upper class’. It would seem that in this static socio-economic framework local élites avoided ‘mixing’ with the subordinate classes by resorting to appropriate marriage strategies to keep their positions intact and continue to serve their interests. For this reason, it is possible to speculate that they did not hesitate to arrange children's marriages, easier if the children are younger, as customary among wealthy families until not so long time ago (Lombardi, 2008; Derosas et al., 2014). The other possible explanation is related to women's participation in the family economy. Being involved in the family's livelihood would induce parents not to give them away as brides too early and probably to enjoy greater freedom and less strong restriction in choosing a partner than their more affluent peers enclosed in a gilded cell and completely excluded from the economic affairs of the family (Fazio, 2004). This supposition would find possible confirmation in Table 3. We can observe that in all marriages, the average age difference increases from the humblest class (around 5 years) to the most affluent class (more than 7 years). Moreover, we observe the same trend in the marriages involving child brides with an even greater average age difference (from 8,7 years among the peasants until

more than 11 years among the wealthy class). Starting from the observation that, especially young people, tend to socialize mostly with peers, it seems difficult to assume that, unless exceptions, a couple with a large age difference has freely formed (Bell, 1879). Usually, the mothers of the future couple handled the negotiation, which could still end in a refusal by the girl (Pitrè, 1889). With reference to 12-15 -years- old brides, it is hard to explain their marriage to a 24-25 even 30-year-old man with a repair of a “romantic getaway” (*fuitina*) to oblige parents to accept the union to restore lost honour. In this regard, it useful to underline how in Mediterranean culture, and in Sicily in particular, the conception of "honour" strongly regulated social life (Schneider, 1971). Therefore, often maidens were forced to totally domestic life to preserve it, avoiding going out unless accompanied (Blok, 1974). For the same reasons just stated, it is difficult considering the marriages of these teenage girls to be the clumsy attempt to make up for a pregnancy already in progress².

Table 3 – *Groom’s professional field and mean age difference between spouses in all marriages and in child marriages (Montallegro 1821-1865)*

Groom’s professional field	N° of marriages	mean age difference	Standard Dev.	Mean age diff. child-marriage	Standard Dev.
Agriculture, Farm and Mine	466	5,3	±9,8	8,7	±4,48
Craft and Trade	81	6	±8,9	8,7	±4,3
Upper Class	162	7,3	±8,8	11,4	±5,2
Other (unreadable)	8	7,4	±12	/	/
Total	717	5,8	±12	9,6	±4,41

Source: *Registri di Stato civile della Popolazione di Montallegro*.

6. Conclusion

The present study is a first attempt to investigate a marriage practice no longer belongs to Occidental culture. In XIX century Italy marriages involving young teenagers were still celebrated especially in the provinces of southern Sicily (Agrigento, Siracusa and Caltanissetta). Montallegro represents a first case study

² Cfr. BELL R. 1979. *Fate, Honor, Family and Village: Demographic and Cultural Change in Rural Italy Since 1800*. London: Routledge. In his study realized in the village of Nissoria (EN), the author cross-references marriage and birth data guarded by parishes (*Status Animarum*) to verify if the “child- brides” were pregnant at the time of marriage.

not just for the high number of child brides, but also for the high nuptiality rate indicating the tendency of widowers to remarry. Here, as in other Sicilian provinces, marriages were celebrated between people belonging to the same social class (homogamous marriages). A first key reading to explain the presence of marriages involving very young brides starts from their social belonging. Their high percentage among the 'upper class' in the period 1821-1865 can be justified by girls' absent contribute to the household economy and by marriage strategies aiming at maintaining their social status. In fact, with data and information available to us, and given the age difference with the spouses, it seems less credible to see these very young girls as the protagonists of romantic getaways then converted into marriage. Concerning poorer social strata, it cannot be excluded, that in few cases young girls were pushed into marriage by taking away from the paternal home another mouth to feed but we can certainly rule out that their marriage was expected to provide the quantum leap that would restore prosperity to the whole family since they were going as brides to a "colleague" of their father's. Finally, the persistence of the well-entrenched idea of "girl honour" as an asset to be protected to not ruin the reputation of the entire family might be a broader explanation to understand why these marriage practices persisted longer in some isolated communities in Sicily less exposed to external exchanges and contacts with other ways of life than in the rest of the country. The paper contains some partial findings regarding just one little municipality of Sicily, it is plausible to assume that by moving a few tens of kilometres different dynamics may emerge especially if we take in consideration the difficult communications at that time. For this reason, the present study aims at expanding in time and space and deepening the issues of social belonging and age differences between spouses within a broader geographic extent. Moreover, it will try to investigate new leads to get new answers, such as the impact of religion, hereditary system and the orphan status on child-marriages.

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SUMMARY

While the Italian and international literature on marriage and family investigated the evolution of family and marriages over time, few attentions have been paid to the history of child marriage in Italy and Europe. Based on the employment of a source still little used in demographic studies, the register of marriage acts of the Kingdom of the two Sicilies (contained in the Registri dello Stato Civile della Popolazione), this article attempts to investigate the early marriage patterns in nineteenth-century Italy (period 1821-1865) focusing on Montallegro, little municipality belonging to the province of Agrigento. Although, child -marriage was practised in all social classes, the higher percentage, together with a larger mean age difference between spouses, is found among the 'upper class'.